

Message On Hold brand bowling along after sending Warne into bat

Few people hang up when the human headline asks if he can put you on hold

BUSINESS success, according to renowned lateral thinker Edward de Bono, is about thinking outside the square. And a local entrepreneur did exactly that when he punted on making a then less popular Shane Warne the face of his business.

Kym Illman, founder of Perth-based telephone messages business Messages On Hold, has in the past staked his claim to fame by becoming arguably the country's most prolific ambush marketer.

The marketing manuals define this form of marketing as the strategic placement of marketing material and promotions at public events that will bring both media and consumer attention.

Illman first came under notice in the early 1990s when he paid youngsters to attend West Coast Eagles AFL games sporting massive white gloves with Messages On Hold printed on them. When West Coast scored the kids would wave the gloves en masse. "It

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took the football authorities months to work out that a small firm in Perth was getting free, national television exposure," Illman says.

Ambush marketing and a good business model have paid off. Messages On Hold now employs 94 and has an additional office in Singapore, as well as clients in 18 countries.

Ahead of contracting Warne to be the face of Messages On Hold, Illman admits to not doing a formal risk and reward analysis. He had read some negative write-ups on Warne in marketing and business names but he thought

that was actually a positive. "That just added to the controversy surrounding the signing," he says. "We expected to lose 20 or so clients upon launch — we lost two — but gained more than \$1 million in free publicity at the launch alone."

The package with Warne involved the use of his image and voice, a number of client functions plus media days. However, in typical fashion, Illman's lateral thinking came up with a pretty innovative use of the legendary spin bowler's time.

"One of the best things we do with Shane is to have him call clients and prospects on the phone," Illman explains. "When they access their voicemail and find Warnie's left them a personalised message about them or Messages On Hold, they play or forward it to everyone they know. "Shane has that effect on

people and very few turn down an opportunity to attend a Messages On Hold function that Shane attends."

For two years before the Warne deal, Illman said he had been tossing around names but always came back to Warne because of his national prominence.

"There's no one bigger nationally than Shane — he's front- and back-page news, people love reading about his colourful life," he says.

But what about the bottom-line impact of aligning your business name with a front- and back-page newspaper human headline? Has the gamble actually paid off?

"Without a shadow of a doubt, it has been one of the best business decisions I've made," Illman says.

"Revenues are up more than 25 per cent in the past year and while we've always been well

known in the AFL states, our presence nationally has risen dramatically."

Significantly, late last year, Message On Hold was ranked eighth in a list of the top 10 emerging brands. Hitching a brand is not just about boosting sales, though that tends to be the general expectation.

"Our problem has never been selling Messages On Hold, but it has been getting the message across about what we do," Illman says. "As a part of our marketing arsenal, Shane has done that for us. He's also helped us grow some of our large accounts into monster accounts in ways we could not have replicated."

The Warne-Messages On Hold contract has until November to run. "At the moment we are unsure of how Shane's retirement will impact on his future with us, but the vital signs are good,"



Gloves off: Kym Illman, founder of Messages On Hold

Illman admits. "We just need him to keep making the news, but given his history that should be a given."

Dancing your business with the stars has been a tried and true formula for brand building, says Sydney-based marketing expert

Carolyn Stafford from Connect Marketing Professionals.

"I think celebs can be great at endorsing a brand and there's many great examples of athletes who have almost single-handedly raised the awareness and profile of the businesses they promote," she says.

But Stafford thinks there should be a good fit between the celebrity and the product.

"I believe many companies don't think seriously about the long-term strategy in having celebs endorse their brand and that they just use the hottest celebrity of the moment," she says. "You should use celebs that have a natural fit with your brand."

On that point, Illman has certainly thought laterally and bowled a beauty. After all, is there anyone in the country or even the world who has been a more celebrated user of messages left on a telephone?

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